

in the meadows

View of the meadows with Newark skyline in background discloses expanse of familiar foxtails (phragmites-communis), area's basic plant. Reed-like grass grows to height of 15 feet. INSET: Jack Churuti and Kenneth Vanderbeck, 14, both of Jersey City, engage in popular meadows sport, trapping muskrat. Long red rod is used to mark the site of the traps.

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MONUMENTAL





Section of Trans-Continental Oil pipe line and maintenance road are laid at Paterson Plank Rd. and Rt. 3.



Meadows' reclamation work is highlighted in Port Newark, upper left, seen from Turnpike Bridge looking north over railroad freight trestle.

MEADOWS

Few Realize the Importance of 30,000 Acres of Wasteland Lying in Shadow of the World's Greatest Metropolis

By JOHN T. CUNNINGHAM

STAFF PHOTOS BY GEORGE KEMPER

WE stood out in the waving fox-tails of the Jersey Meadows near Kearny, muskrat trapper Jack Churuti and I, surveying civilization. Jack, a meadowlands admirer and sportsman for 50 years, leaned back against the thick wooden legs of a billboard which reared above the meadows grass to warn that life could be near-hopeless without a filter cigarette. Jack this day was far from hopeless; in the sack at his feet he carried 12 sleek muskrats taken from the marsh.

A cinder's throw away, the silvery streamlined cars of a Pennsylvania Railroad train raced southward toward Florida. Just beyond the railroad embankment the great arching bridge of the New Jersey Turnpike teemed with trucks and automobiles. Past the billboard, across the fox-tails, we had a muskrat-eye view of the Empire State Building.

In every direction the eye could encompass civilization: Radio transmitting towers, railroad yards, the truck-clogged Newark and Belleville turn-

pikes, giant industries belching enough smoke nearly to hide Newark to the southwest. Snake Hill, topped by Hudson County institutional build-

Generations of commuters, world travelers, engineers, planners and folk-lorists have been absorbed with the so-called "Jersey Meadows," that vast patch of little-used and much-abused land in full view of both Newark and New York. Here, in a new nine-part series by John T. Cunningham, is a close look at that unique region — so familiar from a train window, yet so little known and understood.

ings, loomed to the northwest, no less grim because it is now called "Laurel" Hill.

Jack laughed. "Civilization," he

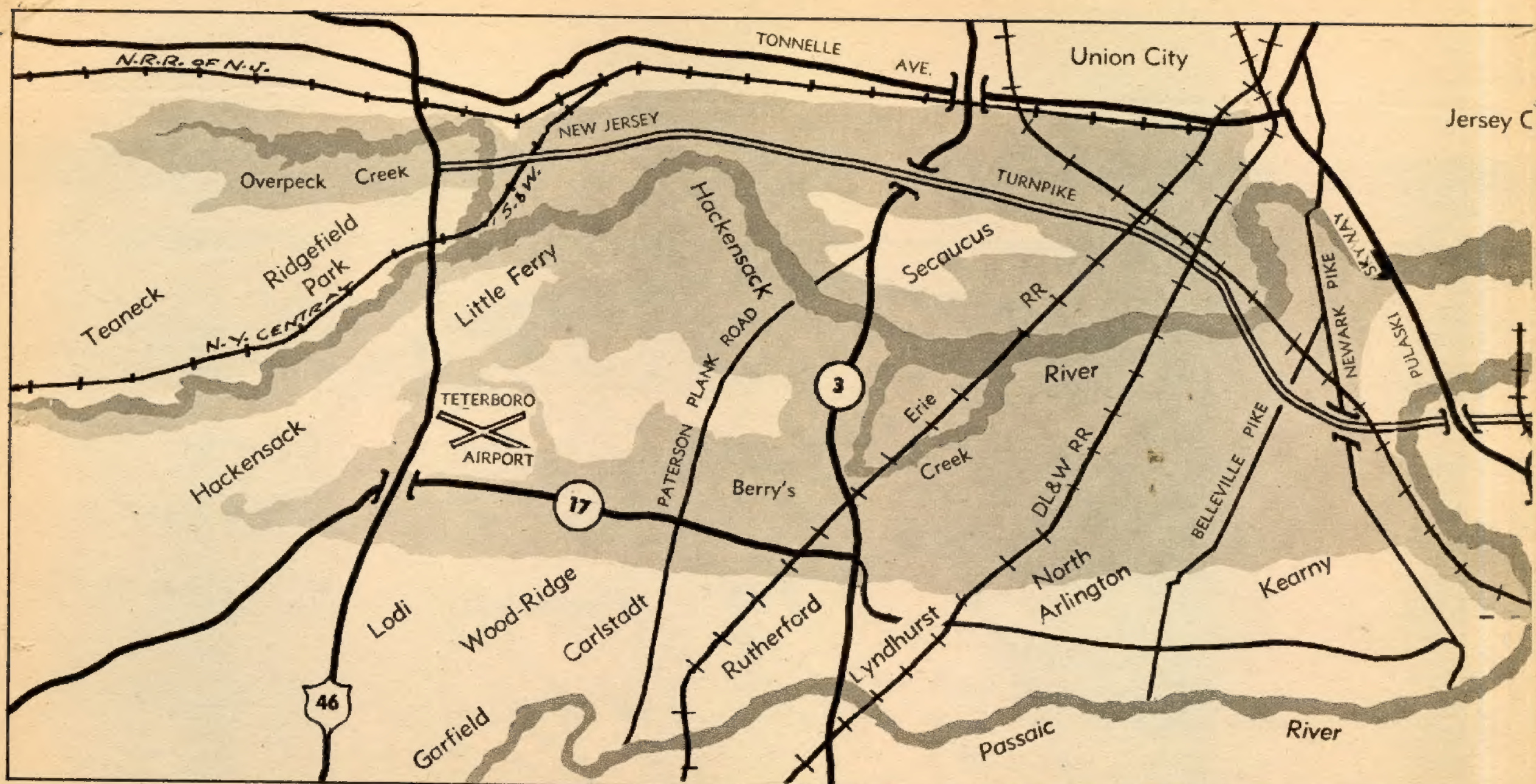
(Continued on Page 22)



Photo from Snake (Laurel) Hill peers down on the Turnpike. In distance, Pulaski Skyway, Koppers Co. stacks.



Tanker heads south in Hackensack River, most important stream in meadows, which runs through heart of area.



Although the Jersey Meadows often are considered a wasteland, the 30,000 acres which stretch roughly between Englewood and Perth Amboy are criss-crossed by major communication lines, many of which appear in map by News artist Frank Dailey.

MEADOWLANDS

(Continued from Page 5)

said. "Boy, there's civilization for you!" He pointed nearby.

THERE it was for sure, where citizens exercising a common meadowlands prerogative had paused on the road to Newark to toss away their debris. Junk and garbage littered the roadside and a battered couch leaned against one of the massive concrete pillars of the New Jersey Turnpike bridge. The sordid and the monumental: That's the story of the "Jersey Meadows."

Trapper Jack Churuti began to move off. "Gotta catch a bus home to Jersey City," he explained. "Tell you what, though. You want to see my trap line in the meadows? Drop me a post card."

We will return, Jack and I, but this day as he walked briskly away the realization came that if the 30,000 or so acres of meadowland between Englewood and Perth Amboy have a heart or a center it is right here—where muskrat trapper quietly pursues his skin game in the midst of one of the most overwhelming complexes man has ever developed.

Exactly how much meadowland there is few stand ready to say. Define it roughly, however, as extending about 28 miles in length, with a maximum width of about four miles in the stretch between Hackensack and Elizabeth. Below Elizabeth the meadowland is a tail of varying

widths. Five counties meet on this peaty bogland: Bergen, Hudson, Essex, Union and Middlesex.

TOPOGRAPHIC maps readily define the marshland by means of thin grass-like tufts on a background of blue lines. Look at such a map and see the meadow—as it follows Overpeck Creek northward to Englewood; as it closes in on both sides of Newark Airport and Port Newark; as it covers an almost unbroken area from Kearny north to Little Ferry; as its mushy soils spill over on both the New Jersey and Staten Island sides of the Arthur Kill south from Elizabeth to Sewaren.

Marshland certainly is no rarity in New Jersey, nor is a patch of misused or little-used land 30,000 acres in extent startling under ordinary circumstances—but this is land only three miles from Broadway and merely a couple of giant steps east of New Jersey's busiest and most lived-in towns.

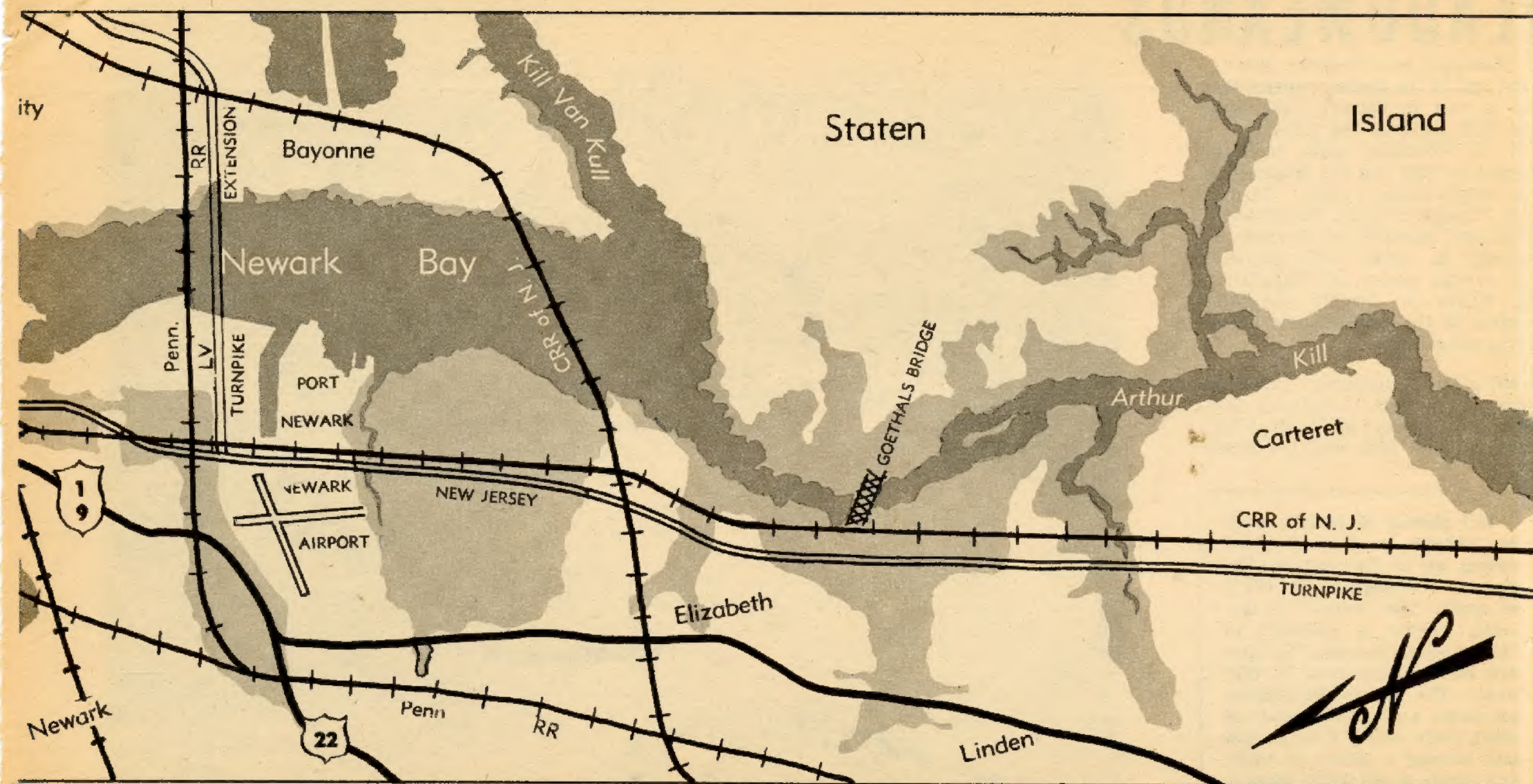
Ralph M. Fields of the Passaic Valley Citizens Planning Assn., in the midst of comprehensive studies for the Meadowlands Regional Planning Board, puts it this way:

"Out in Nebraska this would be a pea patch, but where this is located you've got something incredible on your hands."

RALPH is a Mid-Westerner; it takes an "outsider's" viewpoint for a full appreciation of this meadowlands potential. As another example, try to imagine the emotions of two Amsterdam engineers who recently stood at the end of New York Ave. in Lyndhurst and viewed the meadowlands. James B. McCoy, executive



Visitor to marshlands is overpowered by omnipresent foxtails.



director of the Meadowlands Regional Planning Board, had brought them here to offer the full sweep of the area.

Immediately below, the trio could see one of the dozens of truck terminals in the meadows. Slightly to the east, a drive-in movie nestled close to the turtle-backed Route 3 bridge over Berry's Creek. On the far horizon the New York skyline stood out in bold relief. Between lay four miles of foxtails, whipped occasionally by a northwest wind and rippling like a light green sea. Here was four miles of nearly untouched land.

The Hollanders, undoubtedly thinking of their own land-hungry country where acreage must be snatched from the stubborn sea, turned to Mr. McCoy. One of them exclaimed:

"Nowhere but in America could this be!"

THAT, in a way, sums up the reason why this unique patch of splendidly located region is still largely open—Americans have been so land rich there has not been a need to put forward either enough imagination or money to reclaim the marshy ground.

But this is far from wasteland.

No area is wasteland which boasts of Teterboro and Newark airports, of Port Newark, of the heavy industries clustered in the Kearny meadows. Nor is land undeveloped which is home to immense railroad yards, to criss-crossing highways, to gigantic utilities installations. Development, in fact, is everywhere—in "industrial parks" in the Hackensack and Secaucus marshlands, in huge chemical and

petroleum installations in Union County, in Newark's "Down Neck."

Possibly one fourth of the once-virgin meadowland is now utilized in one form or another. The wonder is not that one-fourth is developed, nonetheless, but rather that between 20,000 and 25,000 acres are still to be conquered, in an era when scientists plot trips to the moon.

Yet for every person who recognizes the vast work already accomplished in the "Jersey Meadows," there are thousands who view the land as hopeless. These are the pessimists who dismiss the meadows with a sniff, and they include of course the millions of people who each year get to "know" the meadows by way of a train window or through the windshield of an automobile moving 60 miles an hour over the New Jersey Turnpike.

GOODNESS knows there is ample reason for turning up one's nose. Surely anyone who has been out on the meadows near Secaucus on a hot July night will agree (and it really doesn't matter whether it's the pigs or the garbage which smell). Too, only to stockholders do the wafted industrial odors near Newark smell heavenly.

Legend has it that the meadows are so treacherous that a single mis-step might submerge an interloper to his arm pits in quicksand or sink holes. This is not true; most of the thousands of open acres are dry (but springy) and can be walked over any time.

Certainly there are dank, wet spots. Why ignore that, when hundreds of

waste-covered acres can be viewed from Schuyler Ave. in North Arlington? The meadowland is no place for unguided hiking, nor is it a place to cut across at night. About three years ago a soldier tried to walk over the meadows from Newark Airport to Elizabeth on a bright fall night. His skeleton was found in a muddy drainage ditch the following spring.

Muskrat trappers warn curious writers to wear hip boots. Jack Churuti put it this way: "Don't wear none of them up-to-me-knees boots or you'll have wet socks before we're done."

SOMETIMES those who see reclamation of the area as a tremendous challenge use a graphic term—"Nature's Slum."

Nature, or geological time, did underlay the entire area with mushy clay which at times is 250 or more feet below the thin crust of peat. At the same time, by making the solid uplands attractive and plentiful and cheap, nature left the meadows costly to use for homes or factories. Man could ignore, or worse, violate the area for centuries.

Blaming nature for the drab, sooty meadowlands of 1959 is an easy and unjustified out. The region that nature created was fresh and clean when humans arrived 300 years ago.

Picture that sweet land, unsullied by the worst in man. The pure Hackensack River flowed down the valley, past the extensive forest of white cedar northwest of Secaucus, past the volcanic outcropping of Snake Hill and down to the broad bay where the tall green marsh grass in

1666 pleasantly reminded Robert Treat and the founders of Newark of the Connecticut home they had just left.

The peat land supported flourishing crops of salt hay and botanists found scores of plants—including wild orchids. Thomas Moran and George Innes, celebrated 19th century artists, found enchantment worthy of their canvases. Little boys fished and swam in the clean streams and picked berries in the splendid open spaces.

ONLY mosquitoes, incredible hordes of them, ruined the idyllic summertime scene—and as a matter of fact, conquering the mosquito probably had far more to do with meadowlands reclamation than the best-laid schemes of engineers.

Eventually, progress came to the land.

The uplands became thickly populated. Industries packed in the meadowland fringes, especially after Isaac Singer built his giant sewing machine plant on the Elizabeth meadows in 1873. Smoke and soot and grime swept down across the grasses. Railroads sliced up the area to suit themselves, building embankments with no thought whatsoever for natural drainage. As the uplands improved, the meadows deteriorated.

People did what came naturally—they cast their wastes into the meadows, and wastes included animate as well as inanimate things. Hudson County, for example, used Snake Hill for its "pest house," its "lunatic asylum," its county peniten-

(Continued on Following Page)

MEADOWLANDS

(Continued from Preceding Page.)

tiary, and in the nearby swamps they laid to rest in Potter's Field those who died penniless and unloved.

C. C. Vermeule, state geologist, warned in 1896 that the meadowland was rapidly facing a crisis. "Manure piles, slaughterhouses, fat-rendering plants and nuisances of all kinds are coming," he wrote. "The saturation with sewage wastes and manufacturing wastes is steadily increasing dangers to the healthfulness of the surrounding towns."

THE pattern continues. Today the meadows are hosts for the junk yards and garbage dumps and tank storage areas no one else would tolerate.

Tall plumes of foxtails wave everywhere in the meadows, edging up to the very foundations of buildings or the edges of roads. The "foxtail" is correctly known to botanists as "phragmites communis" but few call the common reed by that name. The phragmites communis forms a jungle-like cover of stout, leafy stems, 5 to 15 feet tall, bearing a plume of violet and purple in fall which changes to silvery white as the blossoms fade.

Pulling a foxtail out by the roots is a man-sized job. The horizontal root stocks, spreading far out from the stem, form a densely interwoven mat that holds mud and decaying vegetation and so affords a place for water-loving plants. These, in turn, help hold firmer soil in which grow other marsh plants and grasses.

Here abbatoirs and pig stys and chemical plants drain into once-clean creeks. Here, in fact, is everything that people in the hills abhor. Drainage water streams from the hills after every storm to flood the meadows; raw sewage floats in many streams, including Bound Creek at Newark Airport (and the sight of raw sewage floating in a creek less than 100 feet from the New Jersey Turnpike, seen for the first time, is a profound shock).

Full development of the meadowlands is certain, but before it must come a full reversal of philosophy on the part of the uplands. This cannot be both dumping ground and job-producing industrial area; it cannot be both savagely misused and graciously bountiful.

"When it comes right down to it though, where are people going to dump their garbage when the meadows are gone?" an engineer asked. "Where are they going to get rid of their old cars and the 35,000 old automobile tires they throw in this area every week?"

Well, people must face that—be-

cause the meadows will be developed, and soon. That's as sure a bet as you can make, and enough land bettors agree to make the price of land move upward since World War II. When shrewd land manipulators buy this land to hold for profit, and they do, the future is closer than most think.

Two things have combined to make rapid meadowlands development beyond question: Technological advances and scarcity of upland industrial sites.

JUST plain silly is the notion that engineering technology can't cope with this marshy stretch. As long ago as the early 1870s an iron dike actually dried out a huge stretch of land in North Arlington and Kearny. The state geologist in 1896 laid out a sound plan for reclamation. The 20th century is replete with instances

of reclamation—the huge industrial plants in Kearny, the several giant generating stations of Public Service, the Pulaski Skyway, Port Newark, New Jersey Turnpike, the railroad yards. Still, reclamation is neither easy nor cheap.

Roelof Blonk, Public Service Corp. engineer who has been helping to build generating stations in the meadows since 1923, warns that every construction problem offers different problems.

"I'm surprised every time I do something out there," declares Mr. Blonk. "This isn't something easy."

Mr. Blonk and Public Service dollars have erected several electric generating stations on that alleged swamp and those stations are equal in weight to 50-story buildings. The Public Service installations rest on piling as much as 150 feet deep in the

oozing clay—but they rest as firmly as Snake Hill.

This has been the rub until now: Why should industry go to the trouble and expense to reclaim meadowland when upland has been available at relatively low prices? Why should industry pay \$30,000 to \$40,000 or more per acre to buy and reclaim this property, for all its wonderful location in the heart of the world's best markets and hard by unsurpassed rail, truck, air and port facilities?

NOW the scales have balanced. Inexpensive upland industrial sites are not available (especially when an industrialist so much as hints there might be a slight odor or a bit of smoke involved). Industrial sites, when available, have been known to come as high as \$120,000 per acre in the metropolitan area. For this in-



New York skyline, with familiar Empire State Building in center, provides backdrop for meadows. View is over Hoboken with Erie Railroad yards at bottom.



View looking west over meandering Kingsland Creek toward North Arlington. Tracks of Boonton Branch of Lackawanna knife through the flooded meadows.

Air Photos by Jack Johnston

dustry can, and must, look favorably on the Jersey meadows.

Reclamation of all the area will come and quickly. The question and the challenge are not when, but how. Haphazard, uncontrolled growth, such as that which has made parts of Rt. 17 such a nightmare, is in the offing in the absence of rigid planning and enforcement.

As of now the only coordinated program is that of the Meadowlands Reclamation Commission, composed of the five towns of Carlstadt, East Rutherford, Rutherford, Lyndhurst and North Arlington. The commission has done much on an extremely limited budget. (Their "first stage" report by Ernest Erber and his associates in the Passaic Valley Citizens Planning Assn. is unquestionably the most definite single meadows document ever written.)

Utilization plans proceed with exasperating slowness. Who will get up the money: Municipality, county, state or federal government? This is the key. Forget foxtails and clay and slippery marsh and fancy plans. Money is the simple, uncomplicated missing ingredient.

MEANWHILE, life goes on in the waving foxtails.

Mosquito commission employees each year dig their millions of feet of drainage ditches and keep constant check on the thousands upon thousands of feet of dikes around sprawling patches of dry meadow land lest muskrats or storm tides breach the barricades. Dikes and tidal gates are by no means secrets only of the Dutch; mosquito commissions have used them for years in the meadows.

Hunters stalk the grounds in the

fall, knowing that rabbits and pheasants are plentiful. Sometimes a timid deer races across a meadow road. Hundreds of sea gulls sit warily by as garbage trucks spread out their daily bill of fare. Often geese and ducks set down on the salty Hackensack or the equally salty creeks draining the marshes.

No one fortunate enough to study the meadowlands in depth can escape the endless fascination of this ever-changing, strange area. Such appreciation is not lessened because he has been conditioned for years in terms of pig farm perfumes and wild tales of hapless strangers bogging down in sink-holes.

Everyone at first inhales haltingly in the meadows, suspicious that the next breath might be unbearable, and sometimes it is. But not all of the area is noisome, by any means.

ONE day Vernon Conant, veteran Bergen County Mosquito superintendent, led me out along dikes to Eccles Creek. There, in the midst of foxtails 10 feet high, through which I could see the top of the Empire State Building, we found a sturdy diving board. It was hard to believe boys still could swim in the meadows.

"Doesn't it smell?" I asked.

"Take a deep breath," urged Mr. Conant.

The deep breath brought in a gentle odor, something like clam broth or like the lagoons near Barnegat. It's not heavenly, but anyone with a gram of salt in his makeup would like it.

Awareness of meadowlands charm overwhelms the explorer who gets off his plush train seat or beyond the civilized highways to look. Walk along the dikes, ride an airboat over the North Arlington wetlands, climb Snake Hill, board a boat bound up the Hackensack. There's beauty enough for modern painters, although strangely few ever find their way out here.

Certainly beauty is there at night—the fascination of winking signs atop hundreds of industries; the sparkling brilliance of the New York skyline; the green and red signals on the railroads; the glowing windows in thousands of homes on western hills; the blinking lights on radio towers; the busy brightness of Port Newark; the puffing bursts of flame atop refinery towers in Linden.

BUT to talk of beauty is to encourage snorts of laughter from those who visualize the meadowlands as a garbage-infested place fit only for whatever the uplands won't tolerate. Many fear the meadows, and serious planners worry that the huge backlog of fancy and legend might be as difficult to overcome as the engineering, political and financial problems. There is an overabundance of "Joisey Meadows" folk lore.

Jim McCoy, pleasant young executive director of the Meadowlands Regional Planning Board illustrated this for me one day. We rode across the Route 3 bridge spanning Berry's Creek. Nearby, Jim gestured toward a big "For Sale—Industrial Site" billboard sticking above the marshland.

"Signs don't sell land out here," said Mr. McCoy. "People have been hearing this is a swamp for so long they think it's true. They see those foxtails, they see the mud along the creek at low tide and they say, 'No sir, not for me. No factory out here. It would sink out of sight before morning.'"

Mr. McCoy fell silent for a moment, brooding slightly with the dedicated brooding which seems so easily acquired by those who are thinking hard about the future of the 25,000 or so acres of prime property crying out for reclamation. Then he spoke again:

"It's like the guy who ate the first clam and said it's good. We need brave souls out here."

(Next week: 125 million years of meadowland.)